

A Successful Example of the Combination of East and West in Modern Contemporary Cultural History--On the Art of Chinese Oil Painter Zao Wou-ki

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Abstract: Literature and art are an essential part of contemporary cultural history, and Chinese technology, poetry, drama, fiction, calligraphy, painting and sculpture are the quintessence of Chinese culture. In his image, Zao Wou-ki has achieved outstanding success by combining Chinese folk art with Western oil painting. After he settled abroad, his homesickness and his reflections on Chinese culture and art prompted him to consciously take into account the philosophical and aesthetic outlook of Chinese national art in his oil paintings while striving to incorporate the sentiments and aesthetic standards of Chinese national art into his oil paintings with varying degrees of success. The conscious pursuit of Chinese national art is, therefore, fundamental to the in-depth analysis of the characteristics and connotations of the works of overseas Chinese oil painters. This article attempts to analyse the influence and embodiment of Chinese folk art in Zao Wou-ki's oil paintings in terms of composition, brushwork and the pursuit of mood and to study the conscious incorporation and tracking of Chinese folk art in the works of Chinese oil painters.

Keywords: contemporary cultural history, oil painting, Chinese national art, integration, Zao Wou-ki

1. Introduction

Since the introduction of oil painting to China, there have been Chinese artists who went overseas to study oil painting in various periods. With their enthusiasm and longing for Western oil painting, they went overseas through various channels to study and further their studies in oil painting, a phenomenon that was particularly prominent during the Republic of China. In the decades between the Xinhai Revolution and the establishment of New China, China experienced war and social unrest, yet it was relatively active in scientific and cultural exchanges with the outside world. Progressive people from all areas of society and Young scholars are attracted by the advanced technology and culture of the West. In this context, there are many young students and artists in the painting field who have gone overseas to study oil painting art (Jianping & Heqing, 1985)^[1]. After studying oil painting in various institutions of higher learning overseas, they returned to China with great enthusiasm, spreading the flame of oil painting art everywhere. Some of the more famous ones include Xu Beihong, Lin Fengmian, and Liu Haisu. Since the establishment of New China, due to political factors, all aspects of Eastern European art, including oil painting, were fully studied by New China. As a result, the Chinese oil painting world was once influenced by the Eastern European oil painting world for decades and still has far-reaching effects. It was not until the 1980s that a wave of mainland oil painters began to go overseas to study oil painting one after another. Looking back at the century from the Xinhai Revolution to the present, both in China and Taiwan, there are oil painting artists who went overseas to study oil painting and then stayed overseas to develop their art. The philosophical tendencies, aesthetic interests, and aesthetic standards of their national art have been imprinted on their hearts to varying degrees. Although the artists who lived abroad had systematically studied the stylistic system and aesthetic concepts of Western oil painting, as their creative thinking became more mature, they began to further consider and study the ideological essence, aesthetic interests and differences between Chinese national art and Western oil painting, and at the same time, they tried to incorporate them into their exploration of oil painting in their creative practice. It is because overseas Chinese oil painting artists have profound art knowledge, the consciousness of Chinese national art in their oil painting creation, and the pursuit of the fusion of Eastern and Western art that they have achieved different degrees of success through their painstaking and continuous creative exploration, and their oil paintings deeply reveal the aesthetic pursuit, interest and spirituality of Chinese national art. This spirit of Chinese national art is also the key that makes their oil paintings different from

the works of overseas local artists, and it is also the cornerstone of their achievements overseas. There are many representative figures, such as Zao Wou-ki, whose influence of Chinese folk art can be seen in his oil paintings, with mysterious and expansive moods, unrestrained brushwork, and atmospheric compositions, which together create a magnificent scene full of Chinese folk art. Therefore, the pursuit of Chinese folk art by Chinese oil painters living abroad is fundamental to the in-depth analysis of the characteristics and connotations of their oil paintings in their creations(Yinjie, 2005)^[2]. This paper attempts to take Zao Wou-ki's works as an example and analyze the various aspects of Chinese national art such as composition, brushwork, and the pursuit of mood in his oil paintings, and initially study the conscious integration and pursuit of Chinese national art in the works of overseas Chinese oil painters.

2. Composition

Composition is not only an important aspect of European oil painting but also an important part of Chinese national art, as well as an important component and content of various painting art forms. The famous art critic Xie He expressed composition as a "good composition" and listed it as one of the "Six Principles of Chinese Painting" in the period of Wei, Jin and North and South Dynasties. The "management of position" is the creation, construction and arrangement of the picture composition. Through the reasonable arrangement of the picture space and layout, the painter's intention and artistic pursuit can obtain a good foundation. The difference between "composition" in European oil painting and "management position" in Chinese national art is not great in terms of meaning, however, the aesthetic orientation in composition, the artistic rules of specific picture division, and the generalization, cognition and comparison of picture factors between the two are significant differences. Their differences are due to the cultural, philosophical and aesthetic differences between East and West. For a long time, Western oil paintings were closely related to religion, and since paintings had to serve religion and were hung in public to comfort people's souls, the composition was mostly rectangular or square the picture. In addition, after the work is hung on the wall, it creates a certain distance from the viewer, and this distance is one of the reasons why Western painting naturally chooses the focal composition in the composition, which can attract the viewer's eyes and shock them at the moment so that they can feel the revelation of God more quickly. Western painters used more concrete images to elaborate a certain story before the 20th century, so they focused on the authenticity of the figure and did not pay much attention to the factors behind the image of the painting itself(Xiaozhou, 1998)^[3]. Chinese national painting, however, was more popular among the literati and scholars of all ages and was mostly an ink game and a way of life used by the literati for entertainment, a spiritual activity used to express their temperament and cultivate their sentiments. Since most of the artworks were used for playing, enjoying and collecting, Chinese national paintings naturally chose the scroll painting as a convenient style of framing and protection for carrying and collecting, and the composition was mostly in the form of horizontal and vertical length. In addition, the materials used in Chinese ethnic painting are brush, ink, paper and inkstone, the brush is soft, the ink is monochrome, and because of the simplicity of these materials and the aesthetic orientation of Chinese ethnic painting, the pursuit of realistic images is not the ultimate goal of Chinese ethnic painting, but the use of these images to carry out symbols and metaphors, and to express more spiritual things. For all these reasons, Chinese folk painting and all its art forms belong more to the spiritual dimension. The simplicity of the image in the picture drives Chinese folk art to pay more attention to the finer division of the picture itself, the summarization, reorganization and contrast of the picture elements. These factors are also the reasons for the differences in composition between Chinese folk art and Western painting.

Zao Wou-ki is a Chinese oil painter who is well versed in Chinese folk art. Before he lived in France, he had been well educated and studied Chinese folk art as a teenager, and later enrolled in Hangzhou Art College, where he systematically studied Western painting art. In the process of using oil painting as a material to pursue his artistic ideals, Zao Wou-ki's previous study and accumulation of Chinese folk art, coupled with his homesickness in a foreign country, resulted in a high degree of consciousness in his conceptualization and creation of Chinese folk art, the rule of "management of place". The study of picture factors in Chinese national painting art is deeply influenced by Chinese Taoist philosophy, which pays attention to "size", "how much", "straight and curved", "square and round" and "sparse and dense" and other factors of contrast and harmony. It is through his in-depth study of this Chinese national art law that Zao Wou-ki summarizes them into different formal factors in oil painting and combines them perfectly, shaping an artistic space that is either empty or ghostly, heavy, mysterious, or aloof. In Zao Wou-ki's oil painting *Untitled*, Zao Wou-ki adopts a composition style very similar to that of landscape painting in Chinese folk art. The three levels in the picture are structured and occupy the corners of the picture, forming a "zigzag" composition style. This composition style is classic in Chinese folk painting

art, which can use the laws of human vision to properly link the three levels in the near, middle, and far to form the momentum of a closed circle. It creates a lofty and expansive artistic space. Zao Wou-ki perfectly combines this classical composition style of Chinese folk painting with Western oil painting materials, filling the picture with a spatial mood of landscape painting in Chinese folk painting(Xiao, 2019)^[4]. This borrowing of the compositional style of Chinese folk painting originates from Zao Wou-ki's self-conscious consideration and application of Chinese folk painting in his creation, and can also be interpreted as a call and confession of the cultural introspection and homesickness of Chinese artists living abroad. In the work "Tree of Life", Zao Wou-ki eliminates any elements related to specific images and simply uses some rectangular linear elements, arranging them in the picture, which is carefully divided in the picture. These linear elements in the picture are divided with great care, and the brightly colored areas left behind by these seemingly random but rigorous divisions contrast with each other and echo and connect. This abstract division of the picture is more similar to the compositional division of flower and bird paintings in Chinese folk art, which is a pure study of the spatial division of the picture, reflecting Zao Wou-ki's profound training in Chinese folk art and his ability to control the overall composition. In another of his works, 22, 6, 91, Zao Wou-ki fully absorbs the composition style of Chinese folk art of splashing ink on birds and flowers, with three-quarters of the picture covered by an irregular blue-purple color, while the lower part of the picture is a bright medium yellow and solid gray-yellow color. It is not uncommon for Zao Wou-ki's paintings to be composed in this style of ink splashing. The advantage of this style of ink splashing is that it makes the composition of the picture full of flexibility and randomness, the natural flow of the shape divides the picture at will, although the edges are sharp but rich in changes, the finished picture is full of various contrasts, large and small, curved and straight, strong and weak, light and dark, all these contrasts formed in the picture allude to the philosophical concepts revered in Chinese national art. Among the Chinese national arts, Chinese painting is the most respected Taoist philosophical concept, which emphasizes the contrast and harmony of various factors and the philosophical concept of "knowing its white and keeping its black; knowing its male and keeping its female"(Dialectical philosophical thought). Zao Wou-ki's deep admiration for Chinese national art has led him to consciously incorporate the philosophical and aesthetic concepts of Chinese national art into his oil paintings, thus making his works full of oriental implications in their composition(Yang, 2014)^[5].

In his oil paintings, Zao Wou-ki's conscious study, incorporation and application of the rules of composition in Chinese folk art is a natural reflection of his profound knowledge of the East and the West.

3. Brushwork

The use of the brush is an important aspect of Chinese national painting art. Xie He, a famous art critic during the Southern Qi period in ancient China, included "Bone-liked Style of Drawing" in his famous book *Gu hua pin lu* (Classified Record of Painters of Former Times) and gave it a high status. His descendants also took the brush as one of the important criteria for evaluating paintings. "Bone" is not only the simple use of brush and structure but also a metaphor for the temperament of Chinese literati and scholars, which closely combines metaphor and content(Cheng, 2010)^[6]. In the Chinese prose poem "bizhentu"(Chinese calligraphy works) from the Eastern Jin Dynasty, it is mentioned that "those who are good at penmanship have more bones, while those who are not good at penmanship have more flesh". The expression of power, artistry, and structure through "brushwork" and "bone work" is one of the characteristics of Chinese painting and Chinese calligraphy among the Chinese national arts (Those who make good use of the power of the brush when writing calligraphic works have more style, while those who are not good at using the power of the brush have a bad temperament of strength). For Zao Wou-ki, who had a deep understanding of Chinese national art, the "Bone-liked Style of Drawing" naturally became his pursuit in his artistic exploration, which was determined by his national artistic self-consciousness. The power of the "brush" is responsible for his highly structured and powerful images. Zao Wou-ki not only studied the strength of the brush itself in-depth, but also complemented and intertwined the pursuit of brushwork, composition, rhythm, and even mood, making them inextricably intertwined. In Zao Wou-ki's picture, the interpretation of the "Bone-liked Style of Drawing" is at its best. The combined use of brushwork such as dragging, rubbing, picking, and flowing is one of the distinctive features of Zao Wou-ki's works. Each of his oil paintings is repeatedly splashed, rendered, thickly painted and refined, and the brush plays an important role in this repeated shaping of the picture. For example, in his painting "5, 11, 62," the vertical and horizontal smooth strokes fill the whole picture, which is smooth but orderly, and the staggered and jumping strokes in the foreground, which seem to be messy, are rich and have rules to follow. These staggered strokes, like those of a dense forest, not only create a

sense of mottled texture but also create a contrast of power with the smooth strokes in the middle scenes, together creating a rich, thick and desolate mood space(Boxun, 2012)^[7]. Zao Wou-ki's research on the use of the brush even approximates the pursuit of ink-splashing techniques in Chinese folk painting art. In his later paintings, the large splashes of ink used with the brush render a mysterious unknown space, creating a strong contrast of texture with the dry, cohesive, weathered formal beauty of the other parts, reflecting Zao Wou-ki's extremely strong sense of formal beauty and his ability to grasp the picture with ease. Zao Wou-ki's study of brushwork has reached the point of perfection, and those pale, dashing and casual brushstrokes are powerful factors in Zao Wou-ki's creation of the picture's mood; they conceal and collide with each other, echoing each other painfully, expressing an artistic realm of ancient simplicity and profundity, beautiful violet and red. In Zao Wou-ki's work "17, 1, 66," the majestic black brushstrokes create a dark and mysterious world, which is mysterious but not pitch black because there is a little bit of light color revealed everywhere in the black area. It is this dappled and interlocking brushwork that appropriately expresses the artistic rule of "ink dividing into five colors" in Chinese national art while forging a sense of vicissitudes that cannot be achieved in Chinese painting. In this work, Zao Wou-ki uses a very large brush and a scraper-like brush to paint large areas of bright color in the upper right and upper left corners of the black areas, and these bright areas are painted with a spontaneous, confident and crisp brush. Zao Wou-ki is a diligent practitioner of the principle of "theme then writing" in Chinese folk art, which emphasizes confidence and foresight in the use of the brush, and he has a clear grasp of the composition of the picture so that he uses the brush without a trace of delay(Xiang, 2008)^[8]. The use of the brush in this state is inevitably full of confidence and strength, a powerful interpretation of the "Bone-liked Style of Drawing" in Chinese folk art, and a further elaboration and confirmation of the strength and importance of the "bone" in the "Bone-liked Style of Drawing".

Zao Wou-ki's pursuit of brushwork is similar to that of Chinese folk art, and also stems from his conscious pursuit and integration of Chinese folk art in his creative exploration.

4. Conception

Conception is the painter's comprehensive expression of time and space, the spiritual realm pursued by a painting, which can be said to be the soul of the work. In Chinese national painting art, the mood is raised to a very high standard, and it is even sometimes used to measure the taste and height of a painting. Since the Song Dynasty, painters have strived to pursue the mood of their paintings, and the mood of indifference and sparseness in the picture is regarded as a high realm and respected by later generations, which reflects the highest pursuit of the Chinese artists for the spiritual world. European oil paintings, however, are more concerned with the pursuit of real space and color and do not pay much attention to and study the spiritual space of imagination(Min, 2009)^[9]. Therefore, Chinese oil painters living abroad have a profound understanding of the differences between the artistic pursuits of the East and the West. In their oil paintings, they not only consciously reveal the aesthetic interest of Chinese national art but also consciously highlight this difference, thus pulling apart the differences between their works and those of native European oil painters in the pursuit of mood. Zao Wou-ki is a firm practitioner of this belief. After Zao Wou-ki's stay in France, he gradually completed the transition from figuration to representation to abstraction. As his painting style continued to mature, the pursuit of mood, which is highly respected in Chinese national art, became clearer and more intense in his pictures. The contrast of large blocks of color and the harmony of gray and pure colors create a distant, quiet and silent artistic world. This pursuit of space and mood is imbued with the pursuit of a sparse and desolate mood in Chinese national art. For example, in Zao Wou-ki's painting "15, 4, 69," Zao Wou-ki has shaped a world of depressed and aloof, rugged and far-reaching silence through his grand compositional structure and the extreme beauty of the vicissitudes of texture. Because Zao Wou-ki is well versed in the aesthetic sensibilities of Chinese national art and knows that the pursuit of eternity and sublimity is the highest level of Chinese national painting art, although as a painter skilled in both oil painting materials and techniques, Zao Wou-ki would rather give up the attractive aesthetics of the objects' appearance and the real aesthetics of their color, and only use a limited number of colors to attempt to pursue a sublime and eternal world through the shaping and grasping of the aesthetics of texture. There is no doubt that Zao Wou-ki's pursuit of a desolate mood is the aesthetic orientation of Chinese national art Chinese philosophy, especially the philosophical concepts revered by the literati and the scholars, has Taoist philosophy as its deepest root. Taoist philosophy pursues a kind of profound realm, and the phrase "Great Music Having Few Voices, great Form is Beyond Shape" is the highest expression of the sublime realm of Taoist philosophy(Man, 2010)^[10]. With the desire and pursuit of this "invisible" realm of art, Zao Wou-ki consciously takes the aesthetics of Chinese national art as the guiding concept of his creation. Only by eliminating the tangible images could he achieve a realm of "great Form is Beyond Shape". In another

painting by Zao Wou-ki, 19, 11, 59, a brightly colored area is surrounded by a highly varied light blue and several pieces of black, forming a mysterious space with strong contrasts. In this mysterious space, there is both a big scene of heaven and earth and a dreamy scene of Jiangnan with fine rain-like smoke. Both the former and the latter are deeply impregnated with the philosophical concept and artistic realm of "The Combination of Man and Nature, and the tranquility of forgetting oneself" in Chinese national culture. Those images with strong brush strokes, rich in movement and power, not only contain various elements of nature such as heaven and earth, water and fire, but also cleverly fuse them into an ethereal, blank, majestic, and atmospheric art space, highly interpreting the connotation and pursuit of "mood" in Chinese national art. Zao Wou-ki uses this philosophical concept in Chinese national culture and aesthetic concept in national art, together with his skillful oil painting technique, to render this kind of mood space which is swimming in various invisible realms, for example, presenting the realm of mountains and trees, the image of moonlight and water waves, which is the same origin and harmony with the pursuit of the mood of landscape painting in Chinese national art. This pursuit and realm of similarities and differences originate from Zao Wou-ki's ----, an oil painter with deep Eastern and Western cultural and artistic deposits, consciously integrating and pursuing Chinese national art in his oil painting exploration.

5. Conclusion

In summary, Chinese oil painters living abroad, especially represented by Zao Wou-ki, not only have profound knowledge and accumulation of Chinese national painting art, but also have proficient Western painting techniques and skills, after they left their homeland and chose to settle and develop overseas, their homesickness and reflection on Chinese national culture and art, and thus consciously put into practice the differences arising from the collision of Eastern and Western culture and art(Li, 2013)^[11]. This led them to consciously take into account the philosophical and aesthetic views of Chinese national art when creating their oil paintings, deeply integrating the sentiments and aesthetic standards of Chinese national art into their oil paintings, and conducting in-depth explorations in composition, brushwork, and mood. It is because of their consciousness of Chinese national art in their creation, their incorporation, and expression, that their oil paintings finally have distinctive Chinese national art characteristics, and they are distant from the works of overseas local oil painters, thus standing in the forest of painting art.

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